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UNITED NATIONS
Economic Commission for Africa

"ONE DAY IN HER LIFE"
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN AFRICAN WOMAN

by
Sharon A. Billings, Lutheran World Relief
Ruth Bamela Engo-Tjega - UNIFEM
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LC/NAIROB

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULAR PARTICIPATION IN THE RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN AFRICA

12-16 February 1990
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a day in the life of an African woman 1/

Ah, is it really time for me to rise? I feel as if I've only just lay down my head. But I need to get up; I have so much to do before the sun rises. I hope that I have some water left over from last night so that I can wash - Ah yes, there is some here. But there is no time to enjoy it and besides it is so cold. Careful now, I need to leave enough for my husband and my children to wash. If my children go to school without washing then people will say that I fail to take care of my family. Now, quickly, I must light the fire for it brings heat, light is a sign that there is life in this house. While my husband's water is warming on the fire I will sweep the kitchen and outside area and tend to the chickens and goats. Here are several eggs. I can sell them in the market today. (**pause**) Wake up, children, wake up, for the sun is beginning to rise. Bring the baby here; he is hungry and his crying will disturb your father. Here, help me to gather the gourds and buckets. Place those dirty dishes in this basket; we will wash them at the river. Fanta, my daughter, I have warmed some food for you and your brother. Don't forget to eat and wash before you go to school. And please pay close attention in your classes, for it is very important that you learn. Come, little ones, let's go to the river. (**pause**) If my daughter was not at school she could help me with my burdens but I am willing to sacrifice for her education. I stood up to my husband and his family when they said that it was not necessary for her to go to school. I think it is, I want her to learn, I want her life to be better than mine. Maybe she will go to the city and find a job and she will not have to do the things I do. For here the sun is only just rising and I have been up for over an hour already. And it will take another hour just to collect the water and return home. Sometimes I wonder how I ever manage to get everything done. Well, here we are at the river and the sun is rising quickly. I have wasted time by thinking and dreaming; there is no time for such things in my life. Hurry children, fill these containers while I wash these dishes. (**pause**) Alright, let's return now. (**long pause**).

I have returned home and have fixed the morning meal for my husband and the smaller children. After the children ate I sent them to the house of my mother-in-law to play. They are still too young to help me in my work. Now I have gathered the basket which I filled last night with peanuts, okra and tomatoes, have added the eggs which I collected this morning and I am walking to the market with my baby. I hope it does not take too long to sell these things or to trade them for some dried fish and salt. Maybe I will even buy some fruit today. But I must be careful to get a good price for my products and to save some money for the school fees which are due next week. I have almost enough for one child but I must save some more or else I can only afford to send my son to school. And I must send my daughter also! (**long pause**) Hush now, my baby, what is wrong? Can you be hungry still? Lately you have not been satisfied with the milk I can give you. I can't seem to produce enough to fill you. I remember that the nurse at the health centre said that I should take some medicine because my blood was poor. Can that affect my milk? But I can't afford any medicine.

1/ Performed for the first time by actress Christine Campbell at the second Symposium of the Advocates for African Food Security Lessening the Burden of Women, 14 May 1987, New York.

And besides, the health centre is 15 kilometres away and I will have to stand in a long line. The last time I went there I finished too late to return home and had to sleep there. Here I am at home again. I will have to think about this later. **(pause)** I will leave some peanuts and the fruit for the noon meal for my school children but I have no time to eat. I must hurry to the fields for the sun is already high and I must weed my maize field and then go to weed my husband's cotton field. I know that weeding is considered a job only for women but I never have the chance to do a complete job in my field, in which our food grows because I have to work in his field of cotton. And when the cotton is sold, I see very little of the money. Which is more important: food or cotton? You can't eat cotton! But what am I to do? And now my husband has been sick for a few days and I must work even harder. **(long pause)**

Well, the sun is beginning to go down and I better leave the field because today I must go to gather wood since my supply is low. We used to be able to cut the wood at the edge of the village but now some of that land has been cleared to plant more cotton. And the chief has declared the rest of the closest trees to be a reserve so we cannot cut them. Of course they did not consult with the women before they made such a decision. Now we have to pass right by this reserve in order to gather wood. It really doesn't make sense to me. Oh, today I spent too much time in the field and it's getting late. Well, I don't see anyone around. Maybe I can just sneak in here and collect some of the branches that probably fell during the storms of the last few days. Yes, here are a few. It's not much but I can't carry very much anyway since I have the baby and I also have to stop by the garden to gather some things to sell tomorrow in the weekly market in our neighbouring village. My vegetables are always in demand there and I know that I can get enough money to pay for my daughter's school fees and maybe even to buy her a new uniform since her old one has become much too small. I must do all that I can to keep her in school. It's my responsibility. **(pause)** Ah, and there she is, my Fanta, coming to meet me and to help me with my burdens. I am glad because the sun is quickly falling and I should start the preparations for the evening meal. The traditional doctor is coming tonight to help my husband. We think he has been poisoned by an enemy who hopes to gain some of his land. The meal must be finished before the doctor comes so that I can prepare whatever medicine he brings with him. **(pause)**

Now we are at home but what is this? The water has been finished. Doesn't this family realize how far away the river is? Well, we have no choice. Quickly, Fanta, gather the little ones and we will go to the river. Here, take these gourds. Hurry now, time is passing! You little ones, run ahead and wash in the river; you have gotten so dirty today. **(pause)** Stop playing, children, fill your gourds and let's go. **(pause)** What's the matter with you, my child? Why are you stumbling? Are you sick? Ah, you have a high fever! It must be the malaria returning. Here, Fanta, take the baby and I will carry him. Just dump out his water, we'll do with less tonight. This means I will have to take him to the health centre tomorrow. And what I sell tomorrow will have to pay for the medicine. I hope the line at the health centre is short for there is so much to be done. **(pause)**

Ah, I see that my husband is already home. I hope he will understand why his meal will be a little late. Take your brother to the house to lay

down and I will brew him some tea while I cut the vegetables. The sun is almost gone. I'm glad that I was able to pound some extra maize yesterday so I have only a little to pound today. Alright children, please play quietly for both your father and brother are sick. Yes, I know that you are hungry. But you have to wait until I am finished cooking. **(pause)** Alright children, your meal is ready, come and eat. Where are the younger children? Have they gone to sleep already? Wake up and eat. How can these little ones grow strong if they are already sleeping by the time I am able to finish cooking? Then they must be woken up and forced to eat. No wonder this one is sick and the others are weak. Please, Fanta, help me to feed them because I can't let anyone else get sick!

The doctor has come and has confirmed our suspicions that my husband was poisoned. I am boiling a special potion for him. Meanwhile, I have also boiled some fever grass for my sick child and he has gone to sleep. **(long pause)** Finally, everyone is asleep and the house is quiet. But for me, the day is not yet over. I must prepare a meal for tomorrow that my daughter can warm up because I don't know when I'll be back from the health centre. And what about this meat that my friend brought to me this evening? I guess I should smoke it now because I won't have time to do it tomorrow and if I wait for the next day, it will spoil. I will be happy when my husband's brother's widowed wife comes to live in our compound with her children. We can help one another with the work and her children are older and so can also work with us. Maybe I'll even have time to go to a meeting with some of the other women. Then I will also have a chance to wear that new dress that my husband bought for me. Or perhaps I'll even have time to go to that literacy class. I wonder if I can still learn to read and write? **(pause)** It would be so nice to share my work. I am always <u>so</u> tired...